



# 2,700 METRES 1 above sea level

On May 19 of this year, **Hari Budha Magar** stood on top of Mount Everest. In doing so, he became the first double above-the-knee amputee to summit the highest mountain on Earth. His journey to the top was not without its issues, starting with the fateful tour of Afghanistan that led to him losing both legs. Here, **Anna Smith** speaks with Hari shortly after his return from the Himalayas, and reveals a truly inspiring story...

INTERVIEW: ANNA SMITH



Photo: Abir Rai

**H**ari was born 2,700 metres above sea level. When the weather was warm, his family would move their cattle up into the mountains, and when it was cold, they would bring them back down again. That is how he came to be born in a cowshed, folded amongst the hills of Rolpa, Mid-Western Nepal.

Now 43, Hari Budha Magar has seen the world in a way that most of us could only dream of. He travelled to five continents with the Royal Gurkha Rifles, stared tragedy in the face whilst on duty in Afghanistan, fought to overcome it, then broke a long list of world records as a double above-the-knee amputee. One of them was standing atop Everest. Summiting in mid-May 2023, he had only returned to the UK a few weeks before he took time out of his busy schedule to speak with me.

Knowing what I did about Hari, I asked whether the mountains played a big part in his childhood. He never quite confirmed nor denied, just adorned the stories of his early years with the altitude at which they took place. This answered my question well enough.

“My mom gave birth slightly higher than where I grew up. I grew up at about 2,000 metres, and I went to school barefoot. It took probably 45 minutes one way. And I didn't have any pens or paper, so I learned to write on a wooden plank with a chalky stone. I was forced to marry at age 11. And I grew up in Civil War, which lasted for 10 years.”

Speaking from a service station somewhere

between London and Canterbury, Hari was on the way to pick up his son when I called. I was caught off guard by how domestic his situation was, having gotten lost in his extraordinary life story whilst preparing for our conversation. I sensed that I had somewhat ruptured his domestic bliss as he careened through his adolescence and a ten-year civil war.

“I was lucky to skip that war and join the British army when I came here... Then I went to another war again,” he added with a laugh masquerading for a full stop.

The ambience of a car alarm ringing out behind him and the aggressively matter-of-fact way he retold his childhood made it hard to imagine the village where Hari's story started, 4,500 miles away and 2,000 metres up. A gash in the mountainside, the few buildings that constitute Mirul twist their way around the western foothills of the Himalayas. Their bright blue roofs, which poke out of the thick forests, are the only indication that there is a community there at all.

“From my place, we can see Jaljala, which is the highest peak in my district and has snow for about four months. In the east, I could see Dhaulagiri, and in the north is Sisne, in another district. You see the mountains very close, but to go up there takes a long time.”

Barricaded by these mountains on all sides, the region of Rolpa became a natural stronghold for the Maoist insurgency that ripped through Nepal

#### Above

On 19 May 2023, Hari Budha Magar became the first double above-the-knee amputee to summit Everest.

#### Right

Hari ice-climbing with specially designed crampons that he calls his 'stubbies'.



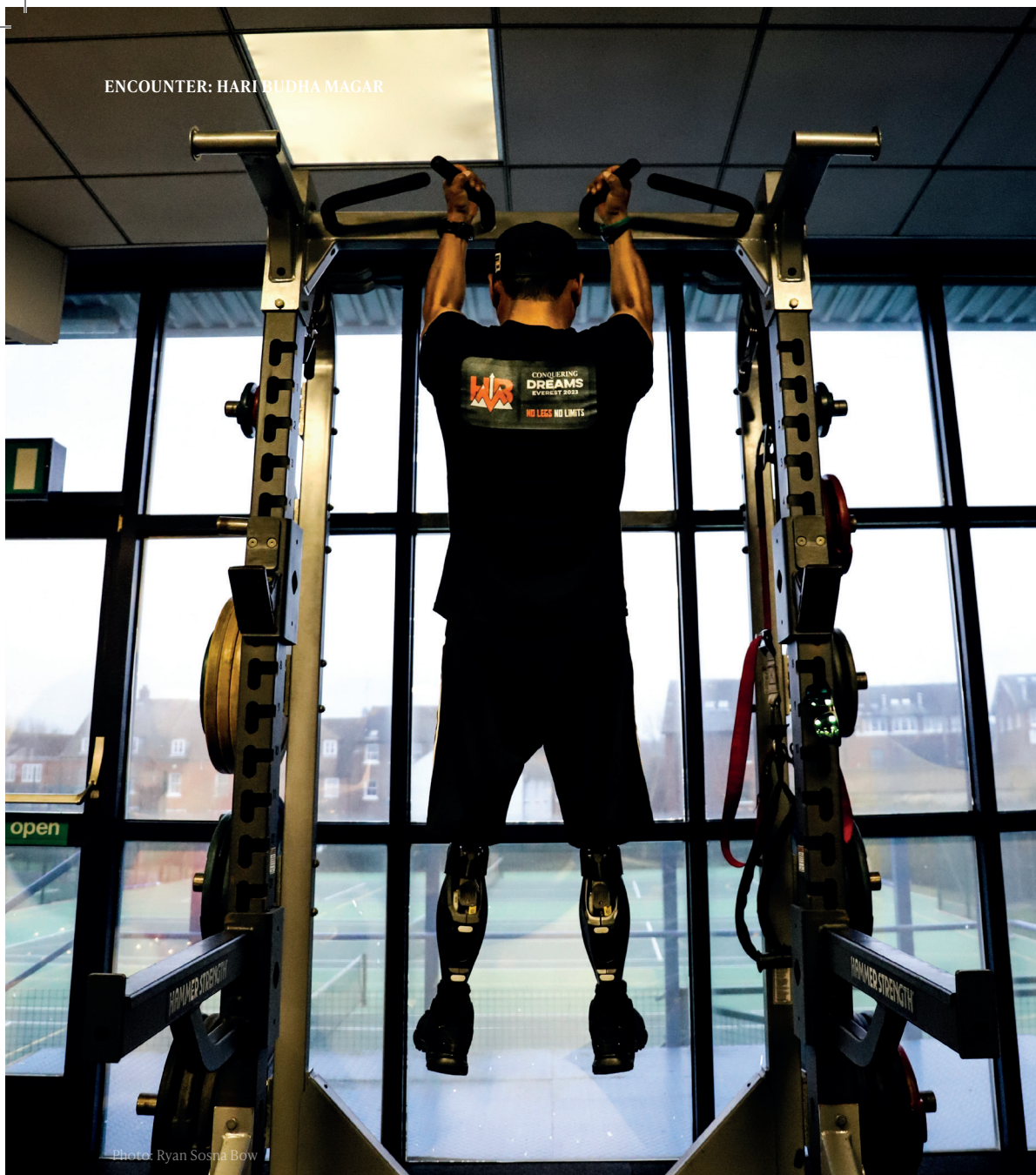


Photo: Ryan Sosna Bow

**Above Left**

Hari working out in preparation for his climb to the top of the world.

**Above Right**

The Everest team had to wait at base-camp for two weeks for a suitable weather window to begin their climb.

in the mid-1990s. Growing up there, however, they were little more than an inconvenience to Hari's sporting endeavours.

"I think there were only two sports that I knew. One is volleyball. Nepal is not that flat. Playing volleyball, you don't need a lot of ground. I remember that the ball used to go down [a hillside], and you have to go down for 15 minutes or half an hour to search for it. So I didn't know about any adventure at that time."

Adventure would soon come his way, however, as he joined the British Army at 19. Serving as a combat medic, sniper, and covert surveillance officer, he saw "some of the harshest environments in the world, along with some of the most beautiful."

## All the Places that Everybody Goes

It was in Afghanistan in April 2010, 15 years after he had joined the Royal Gurkha Rifles, that Hari lost his legs to an Improvised Explosive Device.

"I thought that my life is now finished. Maybe I'll have to sit in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, and I would need a carer. A couple of times I thought,

'Maybe I've done something wrong in a previous life. I'm not going to be able to do anything. I'm going to be this burden on the earth.'

Having stopped to give the local children some sweets, he was walking in a convoy, the 10th man of 20, when the IED went off. Looking down, his right leg was missing and his left was hanging by a thread. The resounding hum of an inbound helicopter told Hari he was going to survive, but hailing from a culture where many view disability as a form of karmic retribution, it was unclear what life he would be left with.

For 12 months, he fought hard to regain his physical independence. He battled alcoholism and depression along the way when one day, in 2011, he was approached by a veteran's charity with the humble offer of a skydive.

"The thing with skydiving is, I had attempted to commit suicide myself. So I said, 'half of my body is gone, half of my body has left. If the other half goes, that's fine'. That was my logic. I didn't know how powerful the mind is at that time. Another thing is, I had never done parachuting in my life, so that would be a good experience if I die."



ENCOUNTER: HARI BUDHA MAGAR

The way his voice barrelled down the phone felt like a dramatic oxymoron. The exuberance and chaos with which Hari told this, and every story made it impossible to imagine a person so resigned. For better or for worse, he readily made the jump.

"After I landed safely on the ground, [I realised] you can do things when you don't have legs. So, after that, it was; 'what can I do physically, without legs?'"

"That's where golf came in. I played golf, and for a guy with no legs, balancing is really hard. Hitting a ball, it's very challenging, especially hitting a ball from the bunker, from the rough ground, facing down on a slope. After doing that, I kayaked, I skied - I skied when I had legs, but I also skied after losing my legs - I can go to all the places that everybody goes. So, what's the problem? I just do it a different way."

What followed was a carousel of all the sports that Nepal's mountainous landscape never permitted him as a boy: "Archery, wheelchair basketball, sitting volleyball, tennis, wheelchair table-tennis, football, curling, climbing."

Climbing. Once again, our conversation returned to the mountains.

## A Legal Mountain

"When did Everest become the goal?" I asked, already realising that for a man who knew the altitude at which he was born, this was a redundant question.

"I grew up looking at mountains, and when you are very little in Nepal, even in our textbooks, Mount Everest is the highest in the world, and it's in Nepal. That's our symbol and pride of the Nepalese people. When I was in service, I couldn't do that [climb Everest] because I was more focused on training, operations, and my career as well. But when I was skiing in the Alps and looking at the mountains, I would still think about Everest all the time; 'how can a double amputee climb the mountain?'. Later on, I met one of my friends Krish [Thapa, the former SAS Head of Mountain Troops]. He's SAS, so he knew all the mountaineering skills. We went to Nepal and tested how my body does in altitude. Is it physically possible? After that, I started climbing."

"The main thing was to climb Everest in 2018, but at the end of 2017, the Nepalese government banned double amputees and the visually impaired, so I couldn't climb in 2018. My aim was to climb one

*"I would still think  
about Everest all the  
time"*





Photo: Abraj Rai

6,000 metres and another 8,000 metres, but it just didn't happen. Then in 2018, it was too late by the time that we went to the Supreme Court in Nepal and overturned the rule. In 2019 I couldn't raise enough funds, and then in 2020 and 2021 Covid popped in. I wanted to do 2022, but my team said no. But we were very lucky, I think, to make this happen. It was the first-ever permit issued to a double above-knee amputee."

Characteristically humble, I wondered how much luck was really to blame in the jumping of these massive hurdles. Hari was a vital part of a large coalition that took the government's ban to the Supreme Court. The ban was successfully quashed in an astounding victory for disabled people worldwide. At the time, Hari wrote on Facebook: "Nepal should be proud of me, not banning me. I will be climbing Everest, whatever the cabinet decides. Nothing is impossible." Getting lucky didn't seem to be a massive concern.

## The Climb

"After all of the setbacks, did you feel ready to take on Everest at the time that you did?"

"No!" Hari's bright laugh tumbled down the phoneline for a little while.

"You know, I was preparing for every eventuality in every possible way. We were never going to be perfect, right? You try to be perfect, but it can't be perfect. The situation changes, and I knew that. So whatever I have got, I need to go. There were no legs that even existed for double above-the-knee ampu-

tees to climb mountains, so we designed them and it took a long time. I didn't have legs that I liked or that I wanted, but I climbed it. How long am I gonna' wait? I wanted to climb it when I was 40. Now I'm 43. I said I would never give up."

Joining a venerable list of record-setters is no easy feat. Tom Whittaker, who lost his foot following a car accident, became the first disabled person to climb Everest in 1998. It took three attempts. Since then, people of all different abilities have achieved the impossible, including climbers with multiple sclerosis, visual impairments, Crohn's disease and many different classes of amputations. In fact, according to the Himalayan Database, 29 people with disabilities have made the climb, of which 15 summited. But no one's ever done it like Hari.

With his shorter gait, it would take him three times as long as your average climber to summit. This leaves him particularly vulnerable to ice falls, frostbite and snow blindness. For the most part, the equipment he would need, like specially designed crampons, heated sockets for his residual limbs, and even his legs, didn't exist.

"My logic was this. We made many things possible. We couldn't fly. So, the Wright brothers thought to make it possible. The whole human race, we couldn't run enough on our feet to explore the world, so we start designing things. We designed things that take us faster. Different things over the land, the sea and around the planet. If you can go to another planet, climbing Mount Everest should be easy."

### Left


Hari was going to climb Everest no matter how many obstacles he had to overcome.

### Above

Krish Thapa and his team have climbed with Hari since the beginning, including on Mera Peak, Nepal (6,476m).



Photo: Abiral Rai



Hari is the first double above-the-knee amputee to summit Mera Peak.

He laughed again.

“That was my logic!” He repeated as if I didn’t believe him.

I’d witnessed enough of Hari’s vigour by this point to know he absolutely believed that to be true. Also knowing what I did about his ascent, I was more surprised that he still stood by it.

Hari, Krish and a team of the best Sherpas in the world set off from Everest Base Camp on May 6. They had to wait for two weeks for a suitable weather window before they could even begin their ascent of the South Col route. They came face to face with the worst of the mountain on several occasions. Adverse weather, leaking oxygen and ice falls all attempted to turn them back. For Hari, there was also a more unique set of challenges to overcome, like fresh snow.

“I always struggle in fresh snow as I don’t have knees to lift my legs up over it, and I have to walk like a penguin from my hips.”

This extra exertion and his slower pace made the riskiest sections of the climb even more perilous. If you’ve ever read about the Khumbu Ice Fall (a rapid moving, crevassed section of the Khumbu glacier not far above basecamp) you’ll know that climbers should not stop for fear of falling ice. For the Sherpas, this means three-3.5 hours of non-stop climbing. For Hari, it meant 11.

“I was taking a breath. My team said ‘It’s not safe here. We need to move fast,’ I just told them ‘I’m sorry, I can’t move faster, I need to take a breath.’ I knew that we just needed to trust and have faith in nature to hold us up, but I knew that if we are in the wrong place and wrong time – nothing can protect us. I have self-belief that I am not going to die anywhere in the world if I’m not meant to die.”

Nature, and Hari’s unyielding sense of self-belief, did indeed hold them up. They were even granted a few favours along the way: “My Sherpas said that this year’s route is long, but it’s ‘the Yak’s route’. By this, they mean it’s an easy route. I joked with them that nature knew that I was coming, and I need an easy route, and we laughed.”

After two weeks of climbing, Hari became the first double above-the-knee amputee in history to summit Everest on May 19.

“Normally, people summit around eight or nine o’clock in the morning. After 12, it’s a no-go. But we summited at 10 past three. We needed to do something that had never been done. To do that, I needed to think differently than others. I needed to work much harder and take more risks. And we did. I’m just very lucky to come back.”

He went on to tell me that this year was the deadliest in Everest’s history. 17 people died attempting to reach the summit, but equally, more people than ever tried. Just over half of those who set out managed to touch the top of the world.

“I feel very lucky to be one of them. So yeah, I’m quite relieved.”

## Duty Calls

“I think my resilience was from my childhood.”

Since returning from Nepal, Hari has been giving speeches, receiving awards and leading conversations about disability, injured veterans, and Nepalese and Gurkha communities. He has said many times that although he conquered Everest, there remains a mountain he will be climbing for the rest of his life: changing perceptions of disability.

He credits his childhood as well as his military career for his perseverance, but he locates his success in much smaller places.

“Getting courage, getting confidence, is not easy. It’s not like a magic wand where ‘abracadabra’ you go and climb Mount Everest. At one point, I couldn’t climb in my wheelchair. Sometimes I couldn’t brush my teeth. I couldn’t have a shower myself. But I thought, ‘that’s one thing I did. Okay, then do another thing,’ and I did it. And do another thing, and I did it. Nothing is easy in life. Right? I think as long as you are prepared to work harder, we can achieve anything.”

No sooner had he imparted the wisdom of his extraordinary life, he added hurriedly:

“At the moment, many people like yourself would like to talk to me. Unfortunately, I stopped at the services and was a bit late.”

Message received. His domestic life was calling. Clearly, being the first double above-the-knee amputee ever to climb Everest makes you a busy man. I imagine being a father of three does as well. Having re-married for love in 2006, his youngest son is now 10 and was especially worried about the ascent. During the most difficult hours of his climb, Hari thought of his son to keep him going.

The reminder that he was sitting in his car at a service station brought me crashing back from the highest heights to my rather unremarkable day. Nevertheless, I had been reminded that that is where remarkable starts.

I thanked him for his time.

“I’m going to go and pick up my son now!”

Just like that, he left me to go on with his ordinary day at a small but mighty 15 metres above sea level. 🏔️